



**BEING AN ADVOCATE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:**

JEFFREY SMITH

19 December 2015

Jeffrey Smith is currently Program Officer at Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights where he manages the organization's advocacy projects that focus on sub-Saharan Africa. He collaborates closely with grassroots civic activists and journalists across the continent - and the world — to highlight pressing human rights concerns to a wider audience. Mr. Smith's research and advocacy has covered Zimbabwe, The Gambia, Swaziland, and Kenya, among others. He appears frequently in media outlets as an expert commentator on African affairs, including on CNN, MSNBC, Al Jazeera, NPR, BBC, and Voice of America. Mr. Smith is a graduate of the University of Connecticut, where he also received a master's degree in international relations and was the university's first recipient of its distinguished human rights graduate certificate.

How did you decide to enter the research and advocacy field? Why did you decide to focus on sub-Saharan Africa?

To be honest, there never really was a time during which I made a conscious decision to enter the research and advocacy field. I initially went to college with the idea of studying communications and radio journalism, wanting to somehow incorporate my love of music into my profession. I found myself listening more and more to socially conscious artists ranging from Mos Def, The Roots, and Public Enemy to Bob Dylan and The Clash. The topics covered in those songs and albums ultimately sparked a deep interest in social movements and human rights issues. I became very interested in — and eventually read every book I could find on — Bobby Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, and later Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and Desmond Tutu, giants and true heroes of South Africa's anti-Apartheid struggle. From then on, I was hooked. Five years later, I graduated from the University of Connecticut with a double major in political science and human rights, the latter of which was a program I helped design. I'm still a huge music fan, by the way, and remain especially interested in the intersection of art and human rights.

What has been the most interesting story or issue that you have covered in your career? Why?

The most interesting issues I have worked on thus far have pertained to countries that are a bit off the grid, ones that may not necessarily receive the attention I think they merit given the atrocious human rights violations that routinely take place. Swaziland, for instance, is a country that immediately comes to mind for me: It is the last absolute monarchy on the African continent and is ruled by a multi-millionaire king who has demonstrated dreadfully little regard for the welfare of his own citizens. In Swaziland, dissent is criminalized and the basic human rights that many of us take for granted are nonexistent. The issue is also a profoundly personal one for me, as several friends have been imprisoned under their draconian laws. I recently helped raise awareness of the worsening situation there by means of a campaign called #SwaziJustice, which helped lead to the release of two imprisoned journalists. To date, that outcome, by far, has been the most gratifying one I have experienced in my professional life.

What are some of the less often discussed security threats facing some of the countries you cover? How can these be addressed?

The Gambia, a small and highly repressive country in West Africa, is disproportionately contributing to the ongoing refugee crisis that we have seen unfold on our television screens. The

humanitarian disaster has been instigated by the Gambian president's increasingly hostile rhetoric, and violent actions, helping to destabilize two entirely separate continents. Through the first half of 2015, for instance, The Gambia was fifth in terms of total numbers of refugees making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy, behind only Syria, Mali, Eritrea, and Nigeria. To put these staggering figures into perspective: at less than 2 million people, Gambia has about 1% of Nigeria's population — and importantly, no jihadist insurgency — but has accounted for 5.1% of migrants that reached Italy by sea, just shy of Nigeria's 5.3%. Examples like The Gambia, and also Eritrea in East Africa, which is losing an estimated 5,000 citizens a month, should prompt us to reconsider what we think of as 'stable' nations and force world leaders and donors alike to address the root causes of instability around the world — more often than not, they are a lack of respect for human rights, democratic principles, and basic human dignity.

What advice would you give someone, such as a current graduate student, who is interested in a career in human rights and security advocacy and research?

This may sound rather simple, probably because it is: do not hesitate to reach out to people and initiate a personal connection with those successfully working in the field. It is no secret that careers in human rights, specifically related to advocacy and research, are hard to come by and are highly competitive. As such, we have all been there — we have all had moments of despair and we have all, at one time or another (and whether we like to admit it or not), figured we may never have the chance to prove ourselves. You will. But, in the meantime, it certainly does not hurt to email and reach out to employed professionals who can give you some necessary insight and perhaps introduce you to others working in the field. Also: be courteous and polite (i.e. be sincere in your relationships, respond to emails, and say 'thank you'), use social media (particularly Twitter) to position yourself as an expert in your field, study, and work abroad (if you can afford it), and do not hesitate, ever, to apply for internships, even if they are unpaid (they quite often lead to entry-level jobs in this line of work).